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ABSTRACT

As more women choose to reenter college or seek employment, marital and family systems undergo change. From an initial sample of 251 women who participated in a reassessment series conducted between 1973 and 1977, 24 women who had chosen to reenter college or initiate careers were selected for follow-up interviews. Women (N=12) who had divorced were matched with 12 women with intact marriages. The sample was further stratified by age cohorts of 30-, 40-, and 50-year olds. In-depth structured interviews and conversational aids were used to explore changes in the subjects' lives, the effects on marital and familial relationships, and the coping strategies which evolved for dealing with relationship stresses. Husbands of the intact marriage group were also interviewed. Variations in communication, accommodation, support, and acceptance of change were identified as factors important to marriage survival. The survival of the marriage after the wife's college or career reentry, regardless of motivations, appeared primarily dependent on the husband. (Author/NRB)

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MARITAL CONSEQUENCES OF WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER REENTRY¹

Jeanne W. Smith

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the patterns and commonalities in marital disruption over a three to six year period subsequent to women's college/career reentry. Twelve women who divorced and twelve with intact marriages are compared through structured interviews. The subsamples are further stratified into age cohorts of 30, 40, and 50-year olds. Husbands of intact marriages were also interviewed. Variations in communication, accommodation, support, and acceptance of change were identified as factors important to marriage survival.

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Women in western societies are moving out of stereotypic roles as personal and societal changes impact on their lives. Today more and more women are choosing to reenter colleges and universities or are seeking employment. As they do so, marital and family systems undergo change. Roles are restructured and realigned, requiring new competences and creativity (Lopata, 1971). Family power relationships are altered as women move from a "head/complement" relationship to a "senior partner/junior partner" or a "dual career" relationship (Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1976).

Despite their eagerness to have a degree or career of their own, they often express concern about the possible disruption of their marital relationship. Women are also concerned about social condemnation and the resulting feelings of guilt (Rubin, 1979). The fear of family disruption and social rejection deters women from taking risks and prevents them from pursuing goals they would like to achieve (Horner, 1972). Women may experience an erosion of marital commitment as participants in the women's liberation and human potential movements as well as in the accompanying the sexual revolution (Bardwick, 1979). The struggle of autonomy vs. commitment persists and age cohort differences are apparent.

Based upon the direction suggested by previous research (Berkove, 1978; Galler, 1977; Katz, 1976; O'Connell, 1977; Rubin, 1979; Hooper, 1979; Rice, 1979), my report presented here examines marital disruption and college/career reentry and seeks to answer questions related to marital stability as well as to dysfunction.

METHODS

This paper reports the results of follow-up interviews of a selected subgroup of women who participated in a reassessment series conducted between 1973 and 1977². Of the initial sample of 251 middle class women, 183 were married when they initially participated and 114 of these responded to a one-year survey. In February, 1979, I again contacted the married women by mail. Approximately 70% of the original sample responded. At that time I asked them to describe changes in their private and public lives. Although approximately 10% of these women were now divorced or separated, almost all the women were positive about experiences and changes in their lives.

From this subsample of women who had participated in the earlier study and responded positively to mail and telephone contacts, and who had kept their homework, I selected a purposive sample of 24 women who had chosen to reenter college or initiate careers. Twelve women who had divorced their husbands were matched with twelve women with intact marriages. The sample was further stratified by age cohorts of 30, 40, and 50-year olds. All were mothers and at the time of the follow-up their children ranged in age from 2 to 36 years.

Through in-depth structured interviews we explored the changes which had occurred in their lives, how marital and familial relationships had been affected, and the coping strategies which had evolved for dealing with relationship stresses. An exercise involving the woman's perception of her role which was a part of the initial series was repeated during the interview. In addition

various conversational aids were used: (1) a life span plan; (2) a rating of dependence/independence on financial, social, and emotion dimensions; (3) a representation of support network including family, social/religious contacts, school/work associates, neighbors, and helping professionals; (4) a diagraming of life space allocation with investment of self and corresponding personal rewards.

Husbands of the intact marriage group were also interviewed. They were asked to give their perceptions of their wives' roles -- their ranked importance -- using the same set of roles she had identified for herself. The men also recorded their perceptions of their wives' dependence. My contact with the women included the 12 hours of group contact during the initial series which included introspective writing exercises with a life diary: the one-year follow-up questionnaire; the 1979 mail questionnaire and telephone follow-up; and the final dyadic interviews which ranged from one to two hours in length. In addition, some of the women were UC Davis students and had contacted me in the Academic Reentry Office and attended weekly support groups which I facilitated. Interviews with the husbands of the married women ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes.

RESULTS

The level of functioning of the intact marriages now ranges over a continuum. Of the three least stable marriages at the time of the initial series one has become a stable relationship and the other two are platonic coexistences. Of the more stable marriages, one has become dysfunctional and two are stable but struggling. Two others

are supportive coexistences of dual career couples moving toward egalitarian relationships. The other four have improved functioning with growing senior partner/junior partner relationships (Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1976).

Among the divorced women most communicate with former mates primarily about children and money. The two youngest women have remarried divorced men, four others in the 30 and 40-year cohorts have/had lovers and most would prefer to be married. However, within the past six months two women in the 50-year cohort have refused their ex-mate's offers of reconciliation. Both women are unwilling to rekindle the relationship since the husbands have "not changed" and the women appreciate being independent and out of a dead relationship. I am reporting here that portion of the findings which deal with two research questions related to marital stability and dysfunction:

1. Was marital dysfunction a motivator for women's college/career reentry?
2. Why did some marriages survive college/career reentry while others ended in divorce?

I will consider the marriages then and now and develop a causal analysis of the patterns and commonalities which occurred for this group during a three to six year period of time.

Was marital dysfunction a motivator for college/career reentry?

At the time of the series many women expressed dissatisfaction with being left behind as husbands grew and developed as individuals. They expressed resentment at not having opportunities for interesting career activities. Possibly motivated by the women's movement of the

1970's, they expressed frustration with the housewife role and claimed volunteer "burnout". Nevertheless, these women expressed a real approach-avoidance conflict. For example, an active feminist described putting her feelings "on hold" in order to make her marriage work. Another woman wrote in her life diary expressing her anxiety:

"How can I return to a career and still keep house, husband and children together? It will require a retraining of all family members and a rewrite of our marriage contract. I have known too many women recently who have found themselves and lost their husbands in the process."³

Of the twelve women who are now divorced or separated, ten had marital problems prior to the initial series and seven had separated at least once prior to the series. For these women marital problems definitely motivated their consideration of alternatives for changes in life patterns. One woman explained:

"My marital problems went quite a ways back before I went to school...and that's, of course why I went to school and why I took your class. The class didn't have anything to do with my marriage. The marriage had to do with the class."⁴

The other two divorced women had high levels of dissatisfaction with their marriages at the time of the series. Their life diaries describe relationship stress about family problems and husbands overly committed to professions. Both, however, analyzed the role of wife as a high priority and rewarding role. These two were very similar to two women in the group which now have intact marriages. They described similar dissatisfaction from their marriages as well as family problems with husbands occupied in careers to the detriment of family participation.

To answer the question, Was marital dysfunction a motivator for women's reentry?, the life diaries and interviews of these

women indicate that for all the now divorced and for some of the still married women, marital dissatisfaction was a prime motivator. According to these women there was a need to reorganize their activities and prepare for a career; to revitalize their lives and relationships. The causal effect was clear for one divorced woman:

"When he left me in April - great time. Extension catalog arrived the day he left...I said, 'to hell with it...I'm going to sign up for a class.' I saw your class and signed up for it. By the time your class arrived he had come back and we had agreed to marriage counseling."⁵

After making a change in their lives, these women had a new perspective and for some this solidified their decision to leave a dysfunctional marriage.

"If school had anything to do with my moving out, it was getting away and looking back at my situation seeing it wasn't satisfying and I started to question it...and the more I started to question it the weaker it seemed to me. I was hurt that I didn't get any more support especially when I thought back to after the war years when he certainly couldn't have gone back and gotten his degrees if it hadn't been with my cooperation."⁶

Why did some marriages survive college/career reentry while others ended in divorce?

The interviews of the divorced and the married women and husbands suggest that the answer may be in the quality of their communication, the husband's acceptance of the woman's role and behavioral change, his willingness to accommodate his own activities, and his willingness to support her endeavors. Another vital factor is the man's occupational satisfaction and involvement.

Communication changes began for one couple during the initial series when the woman shared her life diary with her husband. Her description of having spent the 17 years of her marriage "shrinking

as a person" awakened him to her needs and dilemma and he made major changes in his career and family participation to support her change.⁷

Individual, marital, and family therapy as well as marriage encounter sessions and assertiveness training helped some couples to openness and honesty in their communication styles. This did present hazards especially for the men who frequently were the ones who communicated less freely and adapted less easily to openness. One man said they "were able to get frustrated with each other quicker". Several couples described a "new reciprocity" in end-of-day conversation which they found added to their relationship. They now came together with career activities to share, creating an awareness of the problems as well as rewards each was encountering. One husband described this communication:

"I used to come home and pour everything out when we had a drink before dinner. When she started doing it, I found I wasn't going into details... I probably bored her to death... Time was more limited; we both told important things."⁸

Acceptance of change was most difficult for the men. They perceived their marriage contracts as specifying traditional complementary roles and most had been socialized to expect a wife's support for their activities. Some said it was a "frightening" and "threatening" experience and they felt vulnerable and abandoned. There was recognition that going back to former patterns was neither possible nor desirable.

The women's attitudes ranged from "I'm going to do it no matter what" to "I'm afraid my marriage will end if I continue", and involvement in the Women's Movement motivated rebellion which promoted an imbalance in their marriage relationship. Among those surviving marriages, the militant feminist effect moderated, and both women and

their husbands expressed that a new level of interaction has resulted.

A husband analyzed this change:

"Before we got married, I certainly didn't want my wife to work. I was an ordinary product of the culture - 1952 high school graduate - woman on the pedestal. I was a decent learner but it took a while. She didn't get so far ahead of me but she was angry a lot... We had personal strains in the early 70's... probably some interplay with the Women's Movement... Having moved through it, we both like it better."⁹

Women indicated that they felt their commitment was greater for maintaining the marriages and that they had the most to lose if the marriage ended. However, husbands' responses presented strong needs and desire for marriage survival, frequently showing greater commitment than their wives had expressed. This seemed to motivate their willingness to accept the life style changes their wives expected.

One husband explained:

"I want to change sufficiently so we can live together in a degree of harmony and indulgence... I very much want my marriage to survive--it's been really rocky--there are times when I wondered if it's worth it all.

There've been 3 factors that prevent me from buzzing off - 1) the more I really get to know Mary the more I'd like to see our marriage survive, 2) Christian commitment to marriage, 3) concern about what would happen to me if left at loose ends. I know I'm a survivor but don't know what it would be like for me to survive."¹⁰

Changes in the woman's level of dependency was viewed as assurance that the woman could manage "if I died" or share the economic responsibility freeing the husbands to explore new work patterns. On the other hand, husbands frequently stated "but she doesn't have to work". The women's perceived change in financial dependence was highly significant for divorced women ($p = .004$) and significant for the married women ($p = .016$) when analyzed statistically using a nonparametric two-tailed Sign test. Social dependence on the husband also dropped

significantly for both groups (divorced $p = .022$, married $p = .012$), while the Mann-Whitney U test showed no significant difference between the divorced and married women's dependency levels.

Some husbands expressed the dilemma of having encouraged social and emotional independence to alleviate the burden of having women live vicariously through them and then finding themselves in a masculine shift toward a more feeling perspective. Coping with a stronger, more independent woman presented a difficult challenge. Jung (1933) recognized the dilemma of this reversal of style as he predicted catastrophies could result "when the husband discovers his tender feelings and the wife her sharpness of mind". Husbands did mention the reward from women's greater independence and understanding which led to respect for each others need for personal space and fostered interdependent relationships with consideration for autonomous action.

"She's become more tolerant of my desire to do things my way - Friday night poker games. She always viewed this as selfish on my part. I viewed her schooling - particularly a few times - as selfish on her part. We talked about it. I've accepted her schooling and she's accepted my idiosyncrasies too a little more."¹¹

Accommodation to the changing roles indicated an ambivalence among the husbands either giving initial resistance and then becoming cooperative or indicating their willingness to help and then not performing.

Comments were recorded:

"The kids have a right to expect you at home."

"I like to have a good dinner ready when I arrive."

"How could you possibly leave us to do this stupid thing?"

Occasionally there was an agreement for equal sharing of tasks in principle but not in practice. But husbands did eventually accommodate by assisting with housework and child care. There were incidents of

caring as shown when a professor husband waited out the bookstore lines at the beginning of the quarter to purchase his wife's textbooks. Another husband on changing jobs intentionally chose one of lesser professional challenge for him because it required less out-of-town travel so that he would be available to participate fully in home management. Another on Air Force retirement became a houseperson and attended law school at night while his wife began a full-time job after graduation from Library School.

Frequently women did not expect or request accommodation and worked to keep family routines unchanged as they attempted to be super-persons. Women lamented their inability to say "I really need you to do this," when they were students. However, when they became employed and asked for help, their husbands assumed major household responsibilities. The power of the paycheck seemed to legitimize their requests:

"He didn't change his pattern that much when I was going to school but the first Christmas that I worked...the shop was so busy...Dave was super - cooked dinner, took over grocery shopping which he had not done in 19 years of marriage...whether when I was going to school I just didn't say to him 'I really need you to do this'...I wanted to go to school but wanted life to continue with little interruption for everybody."¹²

Support and resistance were mixed in the behavior of some husbands. One woman described her husband's expressed need for attention while she was studying and yet they both told in detail of a large graduation party he and the family planned for her, complete with a musical production telling the story of her "emergence".

Husbands and families were important parts of the married reentry women's support networks. Ex-mates and spouse equivalents along with

family members were divorced women's valued supports. Support networks of the 30-year old divorced women were much more highly developed than those of their 30-year old married cohort. The divorced 50-year olds expressed the greatest loneliness. Women's support groups and church associates were very important to some in both groups.

The husband's work role identity appeared to be a critical factor in his reaction to the woman's reentry. I found husbands with higher education levels and occupational status were more likely to be supportive, as did O'Connell (1977). Husbands with higher levels of job satisfaction seemed to show greater acceptance of the woman's change, while husbands with lower status occupational levels tended to be in the divorced group.

Over half of the husbands interviewed had made major occupational changes just prior to or simultaneously with the women. Description of their own parallel mid-life crises support the findings of Levinson (1978) and Bardwick (1979) on transitional stages. Men frequently stated they wanted their wives to train or work in their same occupation, extending the senior/junior partner personal relationship to the occupational sphere.

CONCLUSIONS

Women, by enrolling in a reassessment series, indicate a readiness for life change. When they reenter college or a career, they affirm their readiness by this choice. Husbands do not always have an equivalent level of readiness for change or an equivalent rate of acceptance of change. These discrepancies plus expected transitional stresses (Levinson, 1978) impact on relationships.

Marital dysfunction can motivate a woman's choice to pursue college/career reentry. Whether or not a marriage survives such a reentry, regardless of its motivations, appears to depend primarily on the husband. Husbands' occupational involvement and satisfaction, variations in communication, his willingness to accommodate, his support, and his acceptance of change, seem to make a significant difference in whether or not a marriage survives. These findings concur with the findings of Katz (1976), Hooper (1979), and Galler (1977) whose subjects were married couples as well as with the findings of Rubin (1979), Rice (1979), and Berkove (1978) who interviewed only reentry women.

Rubin's women subjects indicated they believed their commitment was highest for continuing their marriages and that they had the most to lose if they failed. In this study the husbands in unstable but intact marriages expressed a high desire for the marriage's survival, sometimes higher than that expressed by their wives, and seemed motivated to accommodate to changing roles. This flexibility and willingness to change appears to be a most important component to marriage survival. However, the woman's goals and strategies in managing her change can reflect her awareness and appreciation of the change this

necessitates in the marital and family systems.

The woman initiates the revision of the marital contract and change in roles and relationship. Her husband's response reflects the cost/benefits ratio of the negotiation. Transitional couple's response to changes in each other is a determinate factor in marriage survival.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation at the University of California, Davis, and a version was presented at National Council of Family Relations Meetings. Portland, October, 1980.

2. Unpublished manuscript "Life Change Following 'You Too Can Return to College' - A Reassessment Series", by Jeanne Smith and Mary Regan portions of which were presented at the California Advocates for Reentry Education Conference, Sacramento, April, 1978.

3. 50-year cohort woman who entered UC Davis Master of Administration program and chose to discontinue study when the program demands were increased. She now has a full-time administrative position and her marital relationship is moving toward egalitarian dual career status with her husband who is a public school administrator.

4. Woman whose physician husband had been living with another woman and moved back home during the initial series. They have since divorced and this 50-year cohort woman entered a UC Davis Masters of Education program and later discontinued it. She is now employed part-time administering a grant-funded agency.

5. 40-year cohort woman who reentered UC Davis and commuted over 120 miles to campus while continuing night work in a hospital. She has recently changed to an off-campus degree program near her home. Marriage counseling did not deter her divorce from her fireman husband.

6. A 1979 UC Davis graduate who now directs a county program for a special age population. This 50-year cohort woman chose to divorce her professor husband of 30 years. She has developed a high level of autonomy and just prior to the interview had refused an offer for reconciliation.

7. Same couple described in Note 3.

8. Husband of 40-year cohort woman in a senior partner/junior partner relationship. He is an architect who has his own office. She entered community college after the initial series and completed nurse's training. As an R.N., she now works part-time in a community hospital but continues to assist him with his office secretarial work.

9. Administrator of major state department who is the husband of a 40-year cohort woman. She holds a professional degree and is enrolled in a Ph.D. program commuting to Berkeley for classes. Her current involvement in feminist activities is limited to occasional speaking engagements.

10. Husband of a 40-year cohort woman who began college immediately after the initial series and will receive her Bachelor's degree in June, 1981 at a state university and hopes to enter graduate school. He is a professor with excellent research and teaching credits and the author of books. They have participated in individual and family therapy.

11. Manager of manufacturing plant and husband of 30-year cohort woman who enrolled the academic quarter following the initial series. After taking time out to have a third child, she is now completing her Bachelor's degree at a state university and hopes to go on to a Ph.D. degree in psychology. They have participated in a marriage enrichment group.

12. 30-year cohort woman who completed a Bachelor's degree at UC Davis and now works part-time in a shop. Her attorney husband made a career change while she was in college. He is concerned about her not using her college training and would like for her to attend law school.

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